

Symbols in the Cemetery

Stroll through any cemetery and you will find one or more tombstones with some type of symbolism. Larger cemeteries will offer an afternoon of discovery. So, what does a particular symbol mean?

“ American gravestone art inherits its symbolism from many sources: the Bible, Greek and Egyptian civilizations, and European cultural history that pre-dates Christianity. Popular fraternal organizations, such as Free and Accepted Masons, the Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, and their many imitators, likewise drew from the same ancient sources. The symbolism essential to the mystery and pageantry of those secret societies became familiar to most nineteenth-century Americans and greatly influenced our country’s history and art.”

-AGS Field Guide No. 8 Symbolism in the Carving on Gravestones

Researching your family history will eventually lead you to a cemetery. What you find there may tell you something new about your ancestor. Symbols found can tell us about their faith and occupation, a social or fraternal membership or of death itself. While there are numerous religious and secular symbols, interpreting them should be done so with the understanding that while some represent a textbook meaning not all hold the same meaning from stone to stone. Someone may have chosen one simply because they liked it. You will find some that are [a] elaborate, [b] simple, [c] whimsical, [d] breath-taking and [e] heart-breaking. With our technology today the message we leave behind is only limited by our imagination.

There are resources in print and on the Internet that can help you learn more on this subject. As I prepared my list to share I thought I’d enlist the help of someone with much more experience on this topic, so I asked Richard Waterhouse to share his answers to three questions. I learned of his newsletter, *Waterhouse Symbolism*, through my membership in The Association of Gravestone Studies [<http://www.gravestonestudies.org/>]. He shares his love of symbolism with others through his monthly newsletter. He has granted RCGS permission to post a sample issue on our web site. You can find the link on our events & news page. [Thanks, Richard!] To learn a little more about Richard you can read this article on him in the October 4, 2008 issue of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution at: <http://tinyurl.com/RichardsArticle>

1. RCGS: If someone is interested in studying symbolism, as it applies to cemeteries and headstones, how or where do you suggest they begin? RW: I would, first, recommend Douglas Keister’s *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*. It’s a wonderful basic book about cemetery symbolism and in many cases, explains the origin of the symbols. If they get particularly interested in a certain period [Renaissance, Middle Ages, Prehistoric, etc.] there are particular books related to those periods. If, in their pursuit of symbols, they become very interested in historic cemeteries, I recommend that they join the Association for Gravestone Studies. Their members are great resources for identifying hard to research symbols.

2. RCGS: What online resources do you recommend? RW: Are you familiar with Kim Jacobson's website <http://magnolia.cyriv.com/default.asp> [click on iconography and list all...]. She gives an explanation of the symbol and shows burials using that symbol. Another site I would recommend is <http://www.everlifememorials.com/v/headstones/cemetery-symbolism.htm> and one more is <http://painting.about.com/cs/inspiration/a/symbolsflowers.htm>

3. RCGS: What book resources do you recommend? RW: There are so many wonderful symbolism books. Some that I would immediately recommend are:

- Keister, Douglas, *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*, Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2004
- Keister, Douglas, *Forever Dixie: A Field Guide to Southern Cemeteries & Their Residents*, Salt Lake City, Gibbs Smith, 2008

- Chevalier, Jean & Gheerbrandt, Alain (Translated from the French by John Buchanan-Brown), Dictionary of Symbols, London: Penguin Books, 1994
- Cirlot, J. E., A Dictionary of Symbols, Mineola, New York, 2002
- Hangen, Eva C, Symbols: Our Universal Language, Wichita: McCormick-Armstrong Co., 1962

Should you want to interpret the symbolism of your ancestors tombstone we hope these resources will be helpful. Look for our symbolism videos coming this summer on our YouTube channel. Remember, every stone has a story!



A



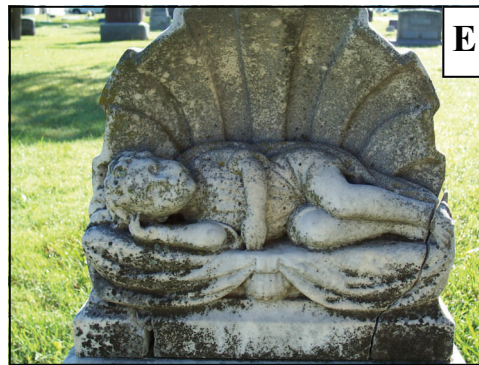
B



C



D



E

Urn: Symbol of death
Draped: Grief, Mourning
Flames: Immortality

